

ALTERNATIVE VENUES: AN EFL WRITING CENTER OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increasing presence of writing centers in diverse English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, particularly in East Asia and in Europe (Bräuer; Chang). These new centers face familiar issues such as a lack of resources, the need to adapt pedagogy to the local context (Reichelt et. al.; Broekhoff), and ideological resistance to the idea of peer learning (Turner) or even providing support for writing at all (Bräuer). In some cases, these difficulties may force potential writing centers to seek a platform entirely outside of the university, bringing both challenges and new possibilities as the center adapts to a community setting and clientele (Rousculp). This article describes the founding of a writing center in Niš, Serbia, in an alternative venue - an American Embassy-funded resource center. This institution has offered significant advantages, including a central location and strong pre-existing member base, but it has also shifted the writing center's focus away from university students towards the diverse writing needs of the broader community. This article discusses how these factors have affected the writing center's mission, the tutors' training and experiences, and the development of local pedagogy and concludes with suggestions for other writing center administrators on working in such alternative spaces.

Introduction

As English has increasingly become the language of globalization and academic publishing, the demand for students around the world to write in English has begun to outpace educational institutions' ability to support students who are writing in their second language (their L2) (Maupate-Steiger). Writing centers have sprung up to fill this gap in a wide variety of international contexts, including East Asia (Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell; Tan), Europe (Bräuer), and Africa (Broekhoff; Papay). In this expanding literature on writing centers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, it's common to find stories of centers which begin with a bare minimum of resources because the universities which house them are unable or unwilling to offer more than minimal support (Broekhoff; Chang; Girgensohn; Papay; Tan). This narrative is perhaps epitomized in the title Melinda Reichelt et al. chose for their article "‘A table and two chairs’: Starting a writing center in Łódź, Poland," which emphasizes how very little the authors had in terms of practical affordances. Certainly, securing a budget is a problem faced by writing center directors across university contexts; as Mullin et al. note, even a writing center housed within and funded by English

departments must "constantly cobble together a budget" with "any other money it can beg, borrow, or steal" (228). What happens, however, in settings when the lack of resources is coupled with enough resistance to a (literally) foreign idea that permission to open a writing center within the university is simply denied? What other options might be available to those who want to support writing education, beyond the bounds of the university campus?

In this article, we first describe the process of founding the Niš Writing Center, considering how the alternative venue in which it was hosted impacted the range of potential clients, the recruiting and positioning of tutors, and the center's pedagogical goals, and how this narrative reflects broader trends in the literature on EFL writing centers. We then examine what benefits and constraints this venue offered, in particular how the American Corner became a stakeholder in the writing center, and how its needs impact the writing center's practices. Finally, we offer our lessons learned, in the hopes that others interested in founding writing centers might be encouraged to look outside of the academy.

This article originates from a series of conversations between the authors about the writing center's practices, which began when Brooke arrived in Niš in September 2014 and was invited to act as an advisor to the fledgling center. Those conversations, together with observations by both authors at tutor training and early tutoring sessions, informal interviews with tutors and the American Corner director, and a review of the tutor-training lesson plans and the fall and spring tutoring logs, developed into this co-constructed and critical narrative of the center's beginnings.

While our focus in this article is on EFL writing center experiences, and on the specific cultural and institutional parameters in which we operate, the process of starting and managing all writing centers involves some common challenges (Broekhoff; Chang). Ultimately, sharing our situated writing center experiences across international boundaries not only validates locally created knowledge about writing and pedagogy (Donahue) but also sets us on a path towards being a truly collaborative international writing center community (Chang).

Finding a home

In the spring of 2013, while Snežana was an exchange student at a university in upstate New York volunteering at the university's writing center, she found herself thinking of how much her fellow students at her home university in Niš, Serbia would benefit from a similar service. Snežana initially hoped to locate her writing center in the university in order to follow the model she had become familiar with in the States, in which writing centers specifically support university students' development of academic skills. Specifically, the mission of the writing center she envisioned would be to help students in the English department of her university improve their writing skills and later on to serve students from other departments, who are often not taught explicitly how to write academic papers in English.

Thus, upon her return to Niš in the spring of 2013, Snežana contacted two professors in the English department who teach academic writing courses. The professors were cautiously enthusiastic about the idea of creating a writing center to support the department's students, and agreed to propose the idea at the department faculty meeting. However, the department refused the request, which the professors reported was due to lack of physical space and funds to pay tutors, without which tutors would be unlikely to remain interested in tutoring.

This resistance reflects some larger issues in writing center administration. First, a lack of funding is a common, persistent, and powerful concern for writing centers around the globe (Broekhoff; Mullin et al.; Reichelt et al.). Funding is needed for training and paying tutors, purchasing supplies, and compensating a director, as well as securing physical space, which enables a center to flourish (Papay; Girgensohn 133). As a result, Simpson notes, writing center directors must be attentive to university administration's budgets, which "drive all power, all decision making, and all priorities" (202). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, as is likely true in this case, a lack of funding for writing centers is tied to a low prioritization of literacy instruction within universities (Reichelt et al. 10).

Second, particularly with writing centers in EFL settings, administrators very often encounter some degree of ideological resistance from faculty and administration. Writing center pedagogy may be totally unfamiliar to instructors as well as students, and even incompatible with local understandings of writing instruction, which may be product-oriented or focused on exam requirements (Reichelt et al. 279). In addition, by its very nature writing center work replaces

hierarchical learning with peer learning, which can be highly threatening to the academic power structures (Girgensohn 129). This threat may well have been a reason for the university's refusal. Finally, as a student, Snežana lacked the institutional status and departmental connections that a tenured faculty member might have, which smooth the path of founding and maintaining a writing center (Mullin et al. 228). Together, these factors create an all too common situation in which Snežana was faced with administrative roadblocks: "in a slow-moving bureaucracy," Mullin et al. point out, writing center directors as "internal agents of change" may "face frustration, [and] can be silenced for their innovative spirit" (227).

The alternative venue

Snežana remained determined to create the support she had envisioned for the writing education of her fellow students in, and later beyond, the English department. After considering her options, she decided to approach another institution which supports English language education: The American Corner. American Corners are Embassy-sponsored resource centers and libraries, managed by local staff, typically experienced English instructors from the community. Their stated aim is "to promote mutual understanding" between the people of the host country and the United States and "to reinforce intercultural exchange and friendship" (Embassy of the United States – Serbia). American Corners provide support for both visiting scholars and local workshops in language, culture, and pedagogy, and their mission is primarily to attract as many community members as possible through their programs.

Snežana, who had been a volunteer for the American Corner during her university studies and knew the staff well, first approached the director of the American Corner Niš about her idea. Specifically, she proposed having a writing center hosted by the American Corner, and in preparation, Snežana would plan and teach a series of workshops on academic writing, open to the general public, from which tutors would be recruited. This American Corner had previously hosted well-received workshops on creative writing, and with increasing interest in studying abroad throughout the community, they were open to further projects involving English-language academic skills. The director thought that this project in particular would open the doors of the American Corner to a more diverse audience and "gather a community of reading and writing lovers" (personal communication). In other words, the writing center project aligned

neatly with the American Corner's goals of engaging more members of the community and followed their existing model for programming: bringing in volunteer instructors and using the existing space, which meant no additional cost to them. As will be discussed further below, this institutional alignment created both great benefits and potential dangers, challenging how the writing center was conceptualized in terms of its tutors, clientele, and overall mission.

Tutor training

One of the most visible initial effects of moving outside of the university was a shift in the tutor population. In contrast to EFL writing centers housed in universities, which can draw potential tutors from more experienced students in departments of English, Snežana needed to recruit tutors from the general community. Thus, she and the American Corner staff planned a two-part recruitment process—a lengthy academic writing workshop followed by a two-day tutor training session. First, the American Corner advertised a free “academic writing workshop” to its members via posters and social media. The writing workshop attracted fifteen initial participants, including high school students, university students, and employed middle-aged men and women, none with much formal knowledge of how to write in English.

The workshop itself consisted of hour-and-a-half long weekly sessions and lasted for nine months, covering topics such as the structure and types of academic essays, more general genres like reviews and cover letters, and the writing process, including peer review. At the conclusion of this demanding workshop, only four participants remained: one high school student and three university students, two in psychology and one in math. These four participants were then invited to become tutors; all accepted, and they went through the final two-day training which included discussions on tutoring techniques, mock tutoring sessions, and addressing the tutors' questions and concerns.

In the fall of 2014, the tutors and American Corner staff worked together to promote the center. The American Corner advertised the center on their Facebook page as well as through their partnerships with local media, and the tutors hung posters in high schools and colleges and spread the word amongst their peers. The advertising push focused primarily on spreading information about the purpose of a writing center and how it works, thereby “involv[ing] itself in the perennial exercise of explaining writing center work” (Reichelt et al. 281). The Niš Writing Center

opened on October 15, 2014, and has been working ever since.

Impact of the location: benefits and challenges

As Tiffany Rousculp notes, community writing centers are deeply influenced not only by the urban area they serve, but also by their specific locations in community spaces or in public libraries, which can shift clientele, partnerships, and ultimately the goals for the writing center's programming. In particular, because the institutions in which community writing centers are housed are already affiliated with some sectors of the community, the writing center is in danger of being “co-opted” by those groups (in Rousculp's case, the educated middle class, rather than the disenfranchised she had intended to serve) or by the goals of the institution itself (Rousculp 132). Likewise, Simpson describes how writing centers and the institutions which host them are interdependent: writing centers must always consider how the institutions' administrators are constrained by “laws and policies, by supervising bodies, by precedent, by public expectations, and by budgets” (200). Thus, although this alternative venue has offered significant benefits to the Niš Writing Center, operating in this space outside the university has also had some drawbacks, namely struggles with the diversity of its clientele and an isolation from some types of academic resources.

Benefits of the American Corner location

The center is situated in the library section of the American Corner's office, equipped with tables, chairs, and computers. In addition to this physical space, ideally located in the center of the city, the center also has access to the American Corner's many writing books and other material necessary for working with clients, which otherwise would be difficult to obtain. The American Corner also gave the opening of the writing center a large initial outreach, not only via its own members and the visitors to its frequent programs, but also (as discussed above) through its social media sites and established connections with local media.

Diversity of clients

Because the American Corner is open to the general community, so is the writing center, and the diversity of potential clients has profoundly shaped the writing center's pedagogy in several ways. First, clients from the community often do not have a specific assignment or writing task, and may not have a clear

goal for coming to the center beyond simply improving their English – again, the writing center model is unfamiliar in this context. Clients thus frequently expect tutors to generate assignments and produce brief lessons for them, casting the tutors into a teaching role. For example, clients often expected tutors to spend sessions selecting and explaining grammar points, such as the sequence of tenses, and then creating tasks for the clients to practice that grammar.

While this teaching role has the benefit of counteracting the idea of a writing center as simply a place for proofreading (see, for example, Broekhoff 73), it challenges the novice tutors, who were trained primarily in academic writing based on Snežana's experiences in the United States. More focused clients might come to work on a very wide variety of writing tasks, including business e-mails, job applications, the GRE and TOEFL tests, and even personal blog writing. With such a diverse clientele, the tutors' preparation in academic essay types is sometimes insufficient, and in contrast with a university setting, tutors are not able to specialize in a particular area (such as technical writing or graduate student writing). Finally, clients from the general community are often much older than the student-age tutors, which has sometimes led to discomfort on both sides, given the hierarchical nature of Serbian society.

These issues highlight the need for writing center pedagogy, especially in EFL settings, to be adapted to the local context. In addition to adapting pedagogy for English language learners, EFL writing centers must often provide a greater breadth of language support than their North American counterparts, including assistance with reading, applying for study abroad, and preparing for tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC (Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell). In some institutional settings, the writing centers adapt by having faculty members act as tutors (Tan 405), which leaves the traditional arrangement of intellectual authority more or less intact.

Isolation from tutoring resources

As the American Corner is an established institution with its own goals and policies, the Writing Center has had to work within its requirements, mission, and goals – as is common for community-based writing centers internationally (Rousculp). One example of this is the access the American Corner provides to its library of English-language materials, which includes not only periodicals and fiction, but also many references and textbooks on grammar, vocabulary, and academic writing. These materials are

relatively hard to come by in Serbia and a fledgling writing center would not be able to easily replicate this collection of resources – a profound benefit.

However, the American Corner has a limited amount of Embassy funding to order new books every year, and the texts selected must reflect the needs and requests of the American Corner's general membership – meaning that highest priority usually goes to new works of popular literature and test prep materials. Thus, there are as yet no tutoring guides or handbooks, materials which would certainly help in training and supporting the novice tutors, in the American Corner's existing library. Despite their generous offer of space, materials, and experience, the American Corner staff's first concern must be their own membership.

As Mullin et al. point out, “the downside of a location outside a traditional academic unit is isolation” (232), and this is doubly so for a location entirely outside the university. First, though the community clients have benefitted from the center's services, it has been more difficult to reach the university student community. Without an independent advertising budget, news about the center is primarily spread by social media and word of mouth, and this process has been steady but slow. More significantly, being disconnected from academia, without the support of a writing program administrator or faculty members, also means that the writing center tutors tend not to have knowledge of or access to current publications or opportunities for professional development such as writing center conferences – which puts the tutors at a disadvantage. The American Corner is able to help the writing center overcome some, but certainly not all, of the hurdles of limited financial resources (Reichelt et al.).

Current practices and future directions

Overall, the mission of the writing center has broadened significantly from a focus on assisting university students studying English in improving writing skills, to a broader goal of developing and improving English writing skills in the general community, working with genres from academic and creative writing to e-mails and blogs. The Writing Center in Niš has now been operating for nearly three years, and is currently open once a week for three hours, with at least two tutors available for drop-in consulting. The Center has had an average of four clients per week, with many returning clients, and has focused on expanding its hours, increasing its client base, and improving its pedagogy. To that end, Snežana and the tutors created an official email account and a Facebook page for the center, and the

tutors visited high schools and university departments in the city to conduct short presentations about the center's services. Taking advantage of their positioning within the American Corner, they advertised to members attending TOEFL prep classes and other programming. The center also decided to increase their online presence by creating a writing center blog featuring a monthly writing competition in which winning work is posted on the writing center blog and shared on other social media.

The Niš Writing Center also recruited three new tutors through a new process which does away with the extensive nine-month training workshop. Instead, the call for new tutors was announced through social media, and potential tutors were selected after a review of their submitted writing samples and informal interviews. The new tutors then observed tutoring sessions and attended a one-day training organized by the current tutors. The entire recruitment process has been a valuable experience for the current tutors, who trained new staff in an authentic peer-to-peer manner, building their confidence and knowledge (Girgensohn 132). Finally, Snežana and the tutors made handouts with writing exercises that are specific to clients' needs. For example, one of the clients had difficulty with writing coherent and cohesive paragraphs, so a tutor who worked with him regularly found an exercise in which the client had to put sentences of a paragraph in order and insert linking words where necessary. This exercise became the basis for a handout on improving paragraph cohesion. In EFL writing centers, pedagogical innovation is often driven by student tutors, who not only help develop a locally-appropriate pedagogy (Girgensohn), but can also help to spur changes in institutional culture by promoting peer-to-peer learning (Bräuer 470). In addition, tutors who share a common first language with their clients have a profound awareness of which textual structures and rhetorical patterns in the second language (L2) may prove problematic for learners, and are therefore ideally positioned to help customize tutoring materials and practices (Maupate-Steiger). For the Niš Writing Center, producing a set of customized teaching materials helps to make writing center pedagogy locally appropriate; making and working with these handouts helps the tutors learn about writing pedagogy as they match specific exercises to clients' needs, and simultaneously empowers them to shape the development of their own center.

What we've learned

The alternative venue provided by the American Corner has made the Writing Center in Niš a reality, while at the same time shifting its focus away from the narrow confines of the university towards the needs of the broader community, and, as a result, shaping its practices from recruitment to pedagogy—a process which will be familiar to those in community-based writing centers internationally (Rousculp). Though the center's work has not been without difficulty, we argue that our experiences have several implications for the work of writing centers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, as well as in community settings in the U.S.

First, we argue that, though it carries challenges, being housed in a more general purpose resource center is in many ways a natural match for EFL writing centers, which frequently must take on a broader language-support mission than their North American peers (Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell). This alternative positioning both permits and encourages the creativity to adapt to that broader mission, and also allows the center to reach out to potential clients through the range of services already offered in general purpose language resource centers, such as TOEFL and GRE test prep classes.

Additionally, for EFL writing centers, moving to an alternative venue can enable the writing center to sidestep ideological resistance put up by the university and to fully explore the benefits of peer learning without threatening the deeply-rooted educational hierarchy which limits writing center practice in some contexts (Broekhoff, Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell; Turner). As Bräuer writes, "peer learning, as part of writing center work . . . can lead not only to a change of individual writing practices, but also to a change in the role of writing—and maybe even to alternative writing cultures within institutions" (470). While the Niš Writing Center's positioning outside of the university means that it does not have an immediate impact on the academic writing culture in Niš, it is working actively to educate the general community and to reach out to students through informal networks.

Finally, the partnership between the American Corner's local staff and Snežana, an exchange student turned administrator, means that the center is drawing on both international funding and writing center models as well as local cultural and educational knowledge. This combination is precisely what enabled the writing center to adapt to the needs of the clientele and their individual priorities about what, when, and how they should write, as Rousculp emphasizes all writing center educators should do (126). We suggest

that, despite the isolation it entails, the location beyond the university has the advantage of a deep flexibility, which other writing center directors weighed down by administrative constraints (Simpson; Mullin et al.) might value. After reflecting on the process of establishing this center, the authors offer the following suggestions, in the hopes that others in EFL settings (and anyone facing bureaucratic hurdles) might be encouraged to look beyond the university. We focus on developing a local practice and on sustainability because, as Broekhoff points out, “local sustainability will determine the long-term value of all your effort” (75).

Sustainability

- **Select a venue whose mission aligns with writing center work.** In our case, the connection was through drawing in more members interested in improving academic English skills. Other alignments might include an interest in test preparation (as at a private language school), or in education more broadly (as at a public library).
- **Educate clients.** Whether through advertising or in person when clients arrive, educating potential clients about the writing center philosophy and services helps to keep the center a place for educating writers.
- **Create your own pool of potential tutors.** Consider how you might entice potential tutors with courses in writing to build up their own skills first, and emphasize a variety of genres of writing in your training – but keep in mind that lengthy or extensive training can be a deterrent to community members with busy schedules.

Developing a local practice

- **Collect data from the very beginning.** Simpson argues that “Next to managing the budget, data gathering is the most important task of writing center directors” (211). Keeping track of clients’ backgrounds and needs – Snežana did this through a tutoring log – allows tutors and administrators not only to determine progress and verify success (Simpson), but also to customize and improve their pedagogy.
- **Transfer responsibility for training to the tutors.** As tutors increase in skill and confidence, they can benefit from directing the training themselves, which eases the director’s workload but more importantly keeps the pedagogy in the hands of those who share linguistic and cultural background with the clients.

Postscript: In the time since this article was written, Snežana has completed her undergraduate and master’s degrees and moved on to full-time employment. She then passed control of the writing center to the tutors she had trained, who took on the task of training future tutors. This process illustrates the deep importance for the sustainability of a community-based center of training staff with an eye towards administrative work, so that, as in the world of non-profits, the organization does not end with the departure of the original leader.

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